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Plain Living and High Thinking: John Woolman's Answer to Materialism

by David Shi

This article appeared in Sojourner Magazine in November 1985 and is used with permission of the author who is now president of Furman University in Greenville, S.C. Though John Woolman's ideas are expressed in phraseology unfamiliar to us today, they have direct bearing not only on our upcoming conference on The Value and Future of Simple Living, but on the "trickle down theory" of economics, and the overworking of both land and people.

Perhaps the meek will inherit the earth. But meekness has never ranked high on the list of American virtues. Soldiers, athletes, actors, and rock stars have commanded more attention than saints. Pity. For it has been the saintly who have spoken most directly to the peculiar American sense of spiritual purpose and moral obligation.

Certainly this was the case with John Woolman, the 18th-century Quaker whose life of Christian simplicity, insistent pacifism, and kindness served as a kindling inspiration to the Society of Friends and to countless others around the world. Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed in 1797 that he "should almost despair of that [person] who could peruse the life of John Woolman without an amelioration of heart."

Yet today Woolman is virtually unknown except among Quakers. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to remember this indomitable man and the way in which he translated his faith into action.

Born in 1720 into a large Quaker family in Northampton, West Jersey, about 20 miles east of Philadelphia, John Woolman lived his first 21 years at home on his father's farm. He was raised in a household of strict Quaker piety where the Bible "or some religious books" were read aloud every Sunday. Like most youths, Woolman occasionally succumbed to the world's temptations. He spoke of himself as a plant "which produced much wild grapes." Yet in time he learned to avoid the "snares" of youth, and by regularly attending Friends' meetings, reading the Bible, and communing with nature, he came to "love and reverence God the Creator and to exercise true justice and goodness, not only toward all [people] but also toward the brute creatures."

Once his inward life was securely grounded, Woolman began planning his outward life. He decided as a youth that farming was not to be his calling. Less than five feet tall, significantly smaller and weaker than his brothers, he was ill-suited to farming. So at

age 21 he left home and moved to the nearby village of Mount Holly, where he began work as a clerk and bookkeeper in a general store.

After several years working with the same merchant, however, Woolman began to worry that such a busy life of trade would prove distracting both to the mind and spirit. All around him he saw Quakers eager to garner quick profits, frequently at the expense of their religious values or family obligations. This he determined not to do. Woolman decided to apprentice himself to a tailor, and in 1746 he established his own small clothing and dry goods store, hoping thereby to "get a living in a plain way without the load of great business and have opportunity for retirement and inward recollection."

Woolman's new vocation allowed him to spend more time pursuing his spiritual calling as an itinerant minister. He began traveling to other Friends' meetings to share his personal message and to advise Friends in ways of conduct. He would eventually make some 30 excursions throughout the colonies, from New England to the Carolinas, exerting a profound personal influence on the Society of Friends.

Woolman spent much of his early ministry crusading against slavery. It was especially distressing for him to see so many Friends owning and abusing other humans. In 1746 he visited Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina. For the first time, he saw the "dark gloominess" of slavery practiced on a large scale, and he determined to do all he could to end such a barbaric practice. He paid for his lodging in the houses of Quaker slave holders rather than accept their hospitality, since it was unpaid slave labor that made such hospitality possible. He also gave up using both sugar in his food and dyes in his clothing because they were products of slavery.

Woolman was able to adopt such strict practices without being sanctimonious. He was as much concerned for the harm that slavery did to the owner as to the slave, so he listened patiently to the slave owners defend their forced labor system with arguments that would become hackneyed by the antebel-

lum period: slavery rescued black people from heathen primitivism; blacks were lazy and needed paternalistic guidance; God had destined that race for a life of servitude.

Woolman saw more rationalization than justification in such statements and was disturbed at the "darkness of their imaginations." The actual reasons for slave holding, he was convinced, were selfish and crass. "The love of ease and gain are the motives in general of keeping slaves, and men take hold of weak arguments to support a cause which is unreasonable." Slaves labored so that their owners could live in unnecessary comfort, and such a labor system flagrantly violated the basic Christian principle of the equality and kinship of all people. With all his gentleness and tolerance, Woolman was unwavering in his basic principles.

By the mid-18th century, he was emerging as a recognized leader of the growing movement dedicated to a revival of Quaker principles. The Friends, he and other reformers believed, had become too enmeshed in worldly pursuits and too preoccupied with material desires. Quaker plainness was giving way to sumptuousness. True to his prescription, Woolman began practicing what he preached. In 1756 he systematically set about reducing his own involvement in material affairs.

From the outset of his career as a tailor and merchant in 1743, he had rigorously applied his religious scruples to his business practices. He tried to keep his poorer customers from going into debt by dissuading them from purchasing beyond their means. He also refused to appeal to their vanity by selling luxuries. Yet despite such unorthodox business practices, or perhaps because of them, his trade prospered. With prosperity, he began to experience the tension between [loyalty to principle] and profits inherent in the Protestant ethic. More than most of his peers, however, Woolman was genuinely troubled at the implications of too much commercial success. His business was becoming more of a burden than a blessing. Did not his obligation to serve God and others demand the bulk of his time and attention?

By 1756 he decided to reorder his affairs. "Through the mercies of the Almighty," he wrote, "I had learned to be content with a plain way of living." After several unsuccessful attempts to curtail his growing business, he gave his customers fair warning and then abandoned merchandising altogether. Thereafter he would make his living as a simple tailor.

An Irish Friend who visited Woolman during this period described him as a man "whose life and conversation shines in Christian piety. His concern is to lead a life of self-denial; pomp and splendour he avoids...His house is very plain, his living also and yet he enjoys plenty of the good things that are necessary for Christian accommodation; we dined with him and were kindly entertained." Woolman was by no means a poor man, but he self-consciously set limits to his vocational pursuits and to his standard of living. He believed that his fundamental sense of personal economy and spiritual devotion provided the key to revitalizing Quakerism in the colonies. In his stirring *Journal* and other writings, he developed a systematic social and economic philosophy based upon Friends' principles. At the root of the problems facing the "great family" of humanity, he observed, was the corrosive effect of wealth, luxury, and covetousness. War, slavery, poverty, and most other social evils resulted directly from humankind's insatiable material appetite and carnal pride. He wrote, "We cannot go into superfluities, or grasp after wealth in a way contrary to [God's] wisdom without having connection with some degree of oppression, and with that spirit which leads to self-exaltation and strife."

Woolman decided that the much-discussed "Indian problem" was in fact rooted in the avarice of white settlers and the political machinations of the English and French governments. Thus, when the French and Indian War erupted in 1754, he encouraged young Quaker men to remain steadfast in their pacifism. He also refused to pay the taxes levied by the English to finance the war. "To refuse the active payment of a tax," he explained, "was exceedingly disagreeable; but to do a thing contrary to my conscience appeared yet more dreadful."

In observing the bustling economic activity in Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley in the middle of the 18th-century, Woolman decided that people were devoting much more of their time and energy to their secular vocations than Christ, George Fox, or William Penn had advised. Those in pursuit of an ever higher standard of living not only worked themselves too hard, they also demanded more from indentured servants or slaves than "pure wisdom" allowed. Landowners and moneylenders tended to charge excessive rent or interest, and those forced to pay such high charges in turn tended to be more callous in their own business dealings. He believed that if people would learn to rest content with a "plain, simple way of living," then much of the grinding labor that they and their servants toiled under would be relieved, and all could devote more time to serving [God], their families, and their communities.

He also recognized that some would inevitably acquire more money than others, and as long as such wealth was used "faithfully for the good of all," he had no objection. But those who consciously caused "men and animals to do unnecessary labor in order that they themselves might have money to spend on luxuries were acting contrary to the design of the Creator."

Woolman forcefully dismissed the argument that widespread unemployment would result from the affluent simplifying their spending habits. If the rich moderated their tastes, more laborers could return to the production of staples rather than baubles. Workdays could thereby be reduced so that a person's vocation could again become a source of pride rather than drudgery. In the process, he hoped, more workers would be free to return to a life of self-sustaining farming rather than wage labor.

He worried that too many farmers were so blinded by the pursuit of profits that they were overworking not only their laborers but the land itself. Future generations would have to bear the burden of their shortsightedness. As he perceptively observed, "To impoverish the Earth now to support outward Greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age."

Supported by his own example of successful self-restraint, Woolman began earnestly preaching his gospel of the simple life as he visited wealthy Friends throughout the colonies in the 1750s and '60s. He felt an inward call to promote a "humbler, plain, temperate Way of Living: a life where no unnecessary cares nor expenses may encumber our minds, nor lessen our ability to do good."

He recognized that leading a simple life of piety and pacifism in the face of alluring entrepreneurial opportunities and social pressures was not easy, it required an inner discipline that was difficult to develop and even harder to maintain. In this regard he sympathized with those wealthy Friends who "have at times been affected with a sense of their difficulties, and appeared desirous...to be helped out of them" yet lacked the spiritual foundation necessary to do so. He assured them that God would show the way. Christ's example "teaches us to be content with things really needful, and to avoid all superfluities."

In 1770 he was forced to curtail his ministerial travels when he almost died from pleurisy.... After several delirious weeks, Woolman began to recover, and thereafter he spent most of his time in Mount Holly, tending his garden and orchard and readying his *Journal* for the printer. But in 1771 he suddenly decided to undertake one more missionary journey. He had learned of the considerable social misery in Great Britain, and he had decided to do what he could to minister to the poor and oppressed.

He boarded ship in May 1772, fully convinced that his mission to England was providentially inspired. One of his close friends, James Pemberton, wrote a letter to a business associate in London, forewarning the English Friends about Woolman's intense piety and strict manner of living: *Our friend John Woolman embarked with Cpt. Sparks on a religious visit to some parts of your Island. He is a Friend in good Esteem among us, of blameless Life, a good understanding and deep in Spiritual Experience, tho' Singular in his dress and deportment. His is not a Censorious Mind, and I believe he apprehends it his real Duty to appear as he does.*

Woolman displayed his "singular" nature soon after boarding the *Mary and Elizabeth*. He noticed that the cabins were decorated with "carved work and imagery" and "some superfluity of workmanship," and could not in good conscience pay extra for such ornamentation. As he explained to the ship's owner, the desire for such luxuries "entangled many in the spirit of oppression," and he could "not find peace in joining in anything which he saw was against the wisdom which is pure." So he decided to travel in the steerage, where for six weeks he shared the hardships of the sailors, "their exposure, their soaking clothes, their miserable accommodations, their wet garments often trodden underfoot...."

[Due to his strange appearance at London Yearly Meeting in June 1772, in undyed clothing and directly from steerage, Woolman was not at first accepted amongst British Friends. He finally] delivered a stirring testimony that literally forced his listeners to take him seriously. The London Friend who had earlier suggested that he return home now rose, admitted his mistake, and urged his peers to do likewise, and the meeting quickly "welcomed and owned" him. That evening one of the Englishmen recorded in his diary that he initially had strong doubts about Woolman, but the "simplicity, solidity and clearness of many of his remarks made all these vanish as Mists at the Sun's Rising."

It was not London, however, that Woolman felt called to visit, but the northern part of England, where social conditions were rapidly deteriorating. A week after arriving in London, he began walking toward Yorkshire. He could not bear to ride in a stagecoach after learning that in their haste they caused cruel hardships on people and horses alike. Traveling on foot also allowed him to see more vividly the life of the people and talk with some of them. As he walked along, he was greatly moved by the sight of pervasive poverty. He agonized over the plight of the post-boys, riding the stages day and night, sometimes freezing to death during the winter months, all because the frantic quest for profits had infected humanity's soul: "So great is the hurry in the spirit of this world that in aiming to do business

quick and to gain wealth the creation this day doth loudly groan!"

As he saw many English Friends working in factories that produced superfluities bound for the North American colonies and others openly engaging in the slave trade, he "felt great distress" at the decline of the original Quaker ideal. But he did not despair. Nature confirmed his faith in the possibility and desirability of the simple life of faith he espoused. "Under the weight of this exercise," he observed, "the sight of birds in the branches and sheep in the pastures, who act according to the will of their Creator, hath tended to mitigate my trouble."

By mid-September, when he arrived in York, he was exhausted. While attending Quarterly Meeting he contracted the much-feared smallpox. As the disease progressed, he calmly accepted the inevitable. "This trial is made easier than I could have thought," he reflected, "by my Will being wholly taken away, for if I was anxious as to the Event, it would be harder but I am not, and my mind enjoys a perfect calm."

To the very end, he remained true to his principles. In dictating his funeral arrangements, he wrote that he desired "an ash coffin made plain without any manner of superfluities, the corpse to be wrapped in cheap flannel, the expense of which I leave my wearing clothes to defray, as also the digging of the grave." A few days later, on October 7, 1772, Woolman died.

Though more than two centuries old, John Woolman's remarkable example of simplicity and pacifism speaks directly to our contemporary condition. To those distressed by the prevailing materialism and militarism of our time, his life offers a compelling alternative: plain living and high thinking.

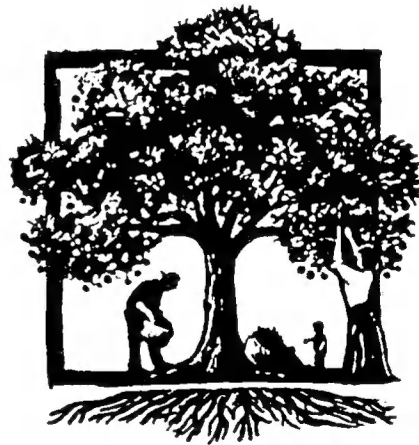
Woolman displayed an inward repose free of egotistical temperament and material ambition and in harmony with the divine will. His legacy in this sense is not of a fixed pattern or rigid mold to be blindly followed but rather an inspiration, a kindling life that provides a simple credo: "A supply to

nature's wants, joined with a peaceful, humble mind, is the truest happiness of life."

John Woolman did not have the vehemence of an agitator, but rather moved among people as an embodied conscience, demonstrating that faith was something to be lived as well as professed. Like St. Francis before him and Mother Teresa after, he simplified his life in order to enjoy the luxury of doing good. "Conduct," he stressed, "is more convincing than language."

Indeed it is. And in this desanctified, spiritually weightless modern era dominated by the hedonistic imperatives of the consumer culture, it is both comforting and challenging to recall a life so firmly rooted in faith and so tirelessly responsive to its ethical imperatives. We need more saints — lots more. For it is the saintly who activate our sense of human possibility. They prove to us the potency of piety and the worth of humane social action. If, as William James maintained, the finest "fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show," then John Woolman represents one of America's most succulent varieties. His exemplary life provides nourishment to us all.

David Shi is the author of The Simple Life (Oxford University Press, 1985) and The Simple Life Reader (Peregrine Smith Books, 1986).



Organic Prosperity

The following is a Country Connections interview with Howard Lyman. Country Connections is published 6 times a year for \$22; P.O. Box 6748, Pine Mountain, CA 93222.

Howard Lyman's recognition quotient spiked recently when he appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show to discuss Mad Cow Disease and current ranching practices. Today he is a well-known speaker for organic farming and a plant-based diet, but before that he was a fourth-generation family farmer-rancher in Montana for nearly forty years.

He became a vegetarian advocate and educator on sustainable agriculture after a life-threatening illness suggested that his meat-based diet and exposure to farm chemicals, including dioxin, were destroying his, and the planet's health.

Mr. Lyman is the executive director of the Humane Society's Eating With Conscience Campaign and a board member of EarthSave. In addition to speaking to thousands of groups, he has appeared on more than one thousand radio stations and hundreds of television stations. In June he spoke with Country Connections on several issues, including the increasing promise of organic farming and "walking the talk" of vegetarianism.

CC: *When you talk to farmers and ranchers today, what do you tell them about making the change to sustainable agricultural practices?*

HL: When we start talking about the industry, the interesting thing is that the organic farming industry has grown about 25 percent per year for the past five years. It is the fastest growing sector of the food chain today.

The majority of net farm income in America today is earned in farmer's markets. There were 9,000 more farmer's markets in 1995 than there were in 1994. You say, "That cannot be true! We produced ten billion bushels of corn and you're telling me that

we had more net farm income in a farmer's market?" The majority of wheat, corn, barley, oats, rice, soy beans, cotton, cattle and dairy in the United States today costs more to grow than what it sells for in the market. The government subsidizes some of the difference, but in many cases farmers can't make up the rest without going into their own back pockets.

So what I say to farmers is, you can continue to do what you're doing right now and go out of business, or you can wake up and realize that the first rule of business is to listen to your customer. When was the last time you heard a customer say, "Boy, I want more red meat, give me more vegetables with more chemicals on them." The consumer today is saying there are three important things: clear air, clean food and clean water. Give me the best, the cleanest that you can give me at the lowest price.

Remember that there were over 2 1/2 million family farmers in America in 1945. Today there are less than 300,000 full-time commercial farmers. Did they all go out of business because they are making too much money? Or were they on a ship that is sinking and has lost everybody on the lower decks and left only the ones on top? The government accounting office today says that if we don't have any major changes in the way agriculture is run in the United States, by the year 2000 less than 100,000 full-time commercial farmers will exist. From 2 1/2 million to 100,000?! So I say to them the choices are not very good continuing to do what you're doing.

I had a good friend in North Dakota who was president of the Organic Association in North Dakota and he told me something I've never forgotten. He said, "My neighbors all out-produce me in everything but one thing." I said, "What's that, Fred?" And he said, "Net profit."

CC: *Is that because of the cost of the chemicals?*

HL: Sure, it's because of the cost of the chemicals, and it's because of what farmers are receiving per bushel for their crop.

I spoke in Ohio to a meeting of about 200 farmers. I walked around the parking lot, and that parking lot was full of pickups. There was one new pickup. The guy who owned the new pickup was the organic farmer. He and his brother had 1,000 acres and in twenty-five years had never bought a chemical. They had the lowest production per acre of any person in the room, but the highest net farm income. They were getting \$1 a bushel more for their organic corn, and they were getting double the price for their soybeans. They were making more money. Every other farmer in the room was losing money.

People hate to step out of the crowd and do something different. People will look at them and say, "What's old Joe doing down there, he hasn't gone out and sprayed. He has weeds growin'." Well, to go from where we are in chemical agriculture today, back to an organic farm where you have microorganisms growing in the soil again takes anywhere from five to ten years. You've got to go through some hard times to get back to where you are going. But I'll guarantee you that where we are in agriculture today is a ticket on the Titanic.

CC: *And as consumers, we have to buy organically-grown produce, even though it's more expensive.*

HL: Absolutely. I say to my audiences that organic is more expensive, but you can buy organic for you and your family for a lifetime for less money than you can spend on one case of cancer in the hospital. It's pay now or pay later.



The Value and Future of Simple Living

This year's Community Service Conference on *The Value of Simple Living* will be Friday evening, October 18th, through Sunday noon, October 20th, at the Outdoor Education Center in the 1000-acre Glen Helen on the eastern edge of Yellow Springs.

If this year's topic for our conference sounds similar to some others we've held in recent years, that is because it is an important issue to consider if our planet is to be saved from overuse.

There are at least two entirely different points of view on this subject. One, that to save our own national economy, we should purchase and consume as much as possible and encourage other nations to do so too. The other is that to save our nation, the world and ourselves, we need to drastically consume less of the world's resources.

The words "simple living" may not imply just what we mean because getting back to raising one's food, cooking from "scratch," or making one's own clothes or entertainment, in many ways may be more complex than purchasing ready-made food, clothes or entertainment. "Plain" may be a better word to describe what we have in mind.

This conference is an opportunity for dialog with and learning from each other, as there are many degrees of simplification of our lives. All of us use technology. It is a matter of making conscious choices of how we want to spend our time and our personal resources as well as the earth's resources.

Scott Savage, a member of the Ohio Yearly Meeting of Friends (Conservative) and editor of *PLAIN*, will give the keynote talk Friday night.

Saturday morning we will have a participatory session where those present may share their concerns and insights for how our choice of lifestyles can affect the future of our planet. Peg and Ken Champney, longtime members of the Vale Community and

authors of the article "Community Made It Possible," will also be with us to share their experiences.

Later in the morning Jim and Eileen Schenk, directors of Imago in Cincinnati (see Holly Knight's article about Imago in our April-June issue), and Joe Jenkins, author of the *Humanure Handbook*, will speak about their solutions for helping the earth so that attendees in the afternoon may decide whether they wish to learn more about how to make an ecological neighborhood where they live or how to safely build humanure composts.

Linden Qualls, a leader of Peace Education Workshops and Cooperative Games, will lead noncompetitive games Friday night and Saturday morning. Saturday afternoon and evening Georgi Schmitt, singer and storyteller who has performed in schools and festivals from Tennessee to Germany, will weave music and legends from Native American, African and European cultures into a program that holds simple living, the Old Ways and environmental awareness at its center.

Saturday evening those who attended the Second Luddite Congress will share insights from that gathering and participate in a discussion of "How Technology & Materialism Affect Community" and how best to peacefully deal with the alienating, anti-community facets of society.

If "the unexamined life is not worth living," then let's explore together how we can get back to a more healthful, spiritual basis of living. If you have not received a brochure with costs, schedule, and registration form and would like one, let us know.



Money—Its Problems and the School of Living

by Melvin Leasure

From the Summer 1996 issue of *Green Revolution*.

Initially there was a legitimate reason for the creation of money. It was to more efficiently and fairly expedite the buying and selling of goods and services. But through the centuries layers of illegitimate personal exploitative reasons have been attached to money by an ever smaller and more powerful group of people until now we have a worldwide money market economy. Money has become more important than people. It is now legally possible for some, including the government itself, to exploit most of us.

There is a legitimate charge, which we call interest, for the lending of idle money to borrowers. This interest charge includes: A) the cost of managing the loan, B) the cost of loan losses, and C) the cost of inflation. The source of this legitimate idle money is earned by the labor of creating goods and services to be sold to others and does not create inflation.

There is an illegitimate charge, called *usury*, for the lending of idle money to borrowers. It is the laying on of an additional charge on top of the interest charge for the purpose of expropriating part of the labor of others' creation of goods and services and it is this usury charge that largely causes inflation.

Most illegitimate of all is the legal power the government gives to private banks to create money "out of thin air" by the stroke of a pen in a ledger book, in exchange for which the borrower must put up the collateral of his enterprise. Even worse, the percent of usury charged determines the percent of foreclosures resulting because the ledger entry never creates enough money to cover the percent of usury payments. This shortage of money is also what helps create the ecological disaster of our polluted air, water, soil and food.

Conservation and Economy

by Wendle Berry

Excerpted from Plowshare News, Volume 17, No. 2, April-May 1995. Reprinted with permission from the summer 1996 issue of Green Revolution

This is how banks have incrementally now come to own most of the world and this is a major source of the exponential inflation we are now in. For example, today's value of a 1913 dollar, when the Federal Reserve Board was established, is now 7 cents. This explains how the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. This illegitimate but legal way for some to pyramid usury for private personal gain is why no civilization has ever survived and why ours won't. This making of money on unearned idle money instead of by the labor of creating goods and services is the heart of the matter.

It is in the understanding of this legal private credit system of creating money and the private ownership of land that explains why the School of Living believes in a decentralized system of local governing control. We are well into doing things locally on the land question through our land trust program. I wonder if it might not be time to have a School of Living program that helps our members create a locally controlled non-exploitative money system.

So what does all this have to do with our Building Without Banks Committee? It is my belief that we should have a revolving loan fund that charges interest and not usury. And further, that we build the fund by soliciting members for their legitimately earned idle funds with the understanding that we would attempt to protect the value of their loans to us and would not exploit members through our loans. And since the BWOB fund is for the internal use of our members it is not now in any position to get into the business of creating locally controlled non-exploitative currency. But perhaps someday?

Bibliography: *New Money for Healthy Communities* by Thomas H. Greco, Jr.; *Interest and Inflation Free Money* by Margrit Kennedy; *Rethinking Our Centralized Monetary System* by Lewis D. Solomon



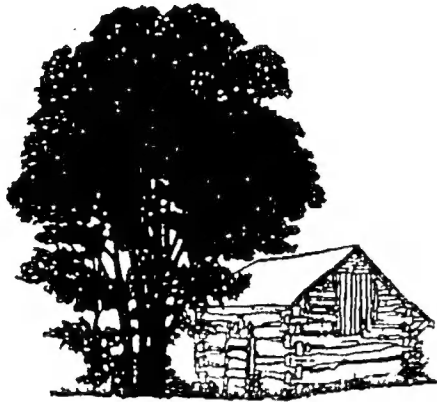
The real improvement must come, to a considerable extent, from local communities themselves...we need local revision of our methods of land use and production. We need to study and work together to reduce scale, reduce overhead, reduce industrial dependencies. We need to market and process local products in harmony with local ecosystems, so that we can live and work with pleasure *in the same places indefinitely.* (italics added)

We need to substitute ourselves — our neighborhoods, our local resources — for expensive imported goods and services. We need to increase cooperation among all local entities; households, farms, factories, banks, consumers, and suppliers. If we are serious about reducing government and the burdens of government, then we need to do so by returning economic self-determination to the people. And we must not do this by inviting destructive industry to provide jobs in the community. We must do it by fostering economic democracy.

For example, as much as is possible of the food that is consumed locally ought to be locally produced, on small farms and then processed in small non-polluting plants that are locally owned. We must do everything possible to provide to ordinary citizens the opportunity to own a small usable share of the country. In that way we will put local capital to work locally, not to exploit and destroy the land, but to use it well. This is not work for the privileged, the well positioned, the wealthy and powerful, it is work for everybody.

I acknowledge that to advocate such reforms is to advocate a kind of secession, not a secession of armed violence but a quiet secession by which people find a practical means and the strength of spirit

to remove themselves from an economy that is exploiting them and destroying their homeland. The great, greedy, indifferent national and international economy is killing rural America, just as it is killing America's cities. It is killing our country. Experience has shown that there is no use in appealing to this economy for mercy toward the earth or toward any human community. All true patriots must find ways of opposing it.



Pete Seeger

by Diane Stanton-Rich

Reprinted from the Summer 1996 issue of Voices, the journal of Rural Southern Voice for Peace, Burnsville, NC 28714

Pete Seeger has always been more interested in using his music to spread messages of peace and social issues than in gaining fame and fortune. I've always admired Pete, enjoyed singing his music, and tried to write songs that will move people the way that his songs have done for over half a century. That's why I was so excited to have the opportunity to chat with him in January at the People's Music Network Gathering. Here's some of what he shared with me...

Q: *What did you think and feel when you found out a week ago that you were selected to be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?*

Pete: Fame is a snare and a delusion, and I am reluctant about the whole business. I, unfortunately, agreed to take some awards (the National Endowment for the Arts, and then the Kennedy Center, in 1994) and one thing led to another. Now I've blown my cover (laughs). I was protected most of my life by my radical reputation, and people were scared to talk to me. Now my mail comes in by the bushel, and the telephone rings all the time.

Q: *Have you seen any examples where music, like the songs that you sing, has empowered people to change?*

Pete: I can't prove a doggone thing! I can only say that I know of individual cases. My life's been changed by music. I've received letters from people who have said their lives have been changed by music, and occasionally there will be a political leader or other kind of leader who praises music as a force. Martin Luther King pointed out that the songs of the Freedom Movement kept it going, even in the darkest times. John L. Lewis, the founder of the CIO Labor Union, said "a singing movement is a winning movement." It's an old tradition that people are worried about music. There's an Arab proverb: "When the king puts the poet on the payroll, he cuts off the tongue of the poet." I think about that whenever I get a job on TV. Plato is supposed to have said, "It's very dangerous for the wrong kind of music to be allowed in the republic."

Q: *Can you give examples of how you have used your music to create change?*

Pete: There are many different kinds of songs. Some songs help you forget your troubles, some songs help you understand your troubles, and — occasionally — a song comes along which can help you *do* something about your troubles. Let me suggest to your readers, if you like music, or for that matter any art, whether it's dancing or pictures or storytelling, you can make it part of the struggle to keep the human race rolling in a better direction. It doesn't mean you have to be teachy preachy all the time. In fact, one of the reasons I came to this gathering of songwriters is to remind them that an edito-

rial in rhyme is rarely a good song. It's much better to tell a story, find a dialogue, describe a scene, paint a picture. Involve people in the event, and they get absorbed, and the next thing you know they've learned something they didn't know before.

Q: *Has this award helped you get your message out?*

Pete: It's possible that my books will sell better. The most recent one is called *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* put out by a magazine called *Sing Out*. [To order, call (610) 865-5366] It has about 200 songs in it, including the title song. In between songs, I tell little stories of how I came to write the songs.

Q: *Any final comments?*

Pete: When you've made some mistakes and figure you're gonna give up...oh...get a good night's sleep, get some exercise, eat some food that's not too fatty and rich, and get together with some friends, find something to laugh at — and try again.



Readers Write

About Community Service Newsletter

What better way to celebrate Independence Day than to write to thank you for the latest issue of Community Service Newsletter which I read with great interest coming home on the train last night from a day in NYC. The three main feature articles were of exceptional interest to me. Last year a friend who had visited Helen Norberg-Hodge in Ladakh introduced me to her book, which I read with great enthusiasm and immediately sent a copy to Rex [Barger.] I was glad to be brought up to date on her activities.

The second article, "Deleting Childhood," reminded me of a book I read a few years ago on that subject, "Evolution's End" by Joseph Chilton Pearce, another book which I recommended to friends.

But I was particularly happy to read the report on the Luddite Congress because without your newsletter I would not have known of the existence of this group. I first heard of the Luddites through a feature article in the New York Times Book Review about the author, Thomas Pynchon (do I have that name right?), which identified him as a follower of the Luddites and explained who they were. I felt very sympathetic toward their outrage over the effects of industrialization. I don't read the Times Book Review section very often, but this article attracted my attention because my nephew, Jom, was a fan of Pynchon and recommended one of his books to me. I didn't care much for the book, but it had a quality of mystery about it which puzzled me, and after reading about the Luddites I realized that some of the rather surrealistic symbolism in the novel was really aimed at criticizing the "Silicon valley" mentality of American business today.

Anyhow, I'm very sympathetic to any criticism of machines. Just that morning I had experienced one of the many occasions on which they have let me down. A friend had called me about a check I had written two weeks ago which had not arrived. When

I called my bank to find out about it, they couldn't help me because "the computers were down" so now I have to wait till tomorrow to find out about the check. I thought of the "old days" when a person could have answered my question and gotten the information I needed from a file.

It all reminds me of one of my favorite Pogo cartoons. Pogo is talking to a woman who is hanging out her wash by means of bulldogs who clamp the clothes in their teeth while she ties their tails to her line. Pogo asks innocently, "But don't you believe in modern conveniences, like clothespins?" and she replies, "Thank goodness, modern conveniences is a thing of the remote future!" I found myself saying in this case, "I wish I could say, 'Thank goodness, modern technology is a thing of the remote future—but I wish the future were a little more remote.'"

This is all to let you know your efforts are appreciated. I always find interesting material in your newsletter, though the format is a little daunting to me. I think it is because you have to use such small type to economize on space. Once I get past my initial reaction I see many advantages, such as the fact that it is easy to carry in my backpack for reading on the train on my trips to the city; it doesn't weigh much.

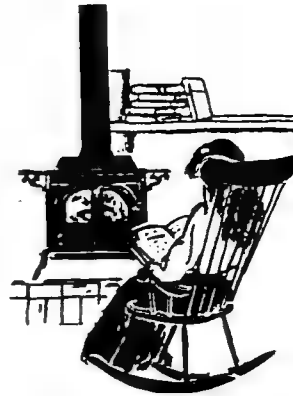
Erva Barger Zuckerman, Greenwich, CT

Your July-September 1996 issue about children and computers, preserving communities, and the Luddite revolt was excellent. I've been in my own minor revolt for years. When the Yellow Springs Library computerized the filing system, I cringed. It was no improvement as a recent article in the *Utne Reader* proved. I'll try to make the October conference.

Lance Grolla, Crestone, CO

The July-September issue is great. I like our "new" Newsletter — more in-depth treatment of material.

Cecil Holland, Blue Creek, OH



About the Genetic Manipulation of Foods

Dr. John Fagan, molecular biologist, and Dr. John Hagelin, presidential candidate for the Natural Law Party, reported that food crops are being genetically engineered and will be on the market at harvest time. Genetic engineering works with DNA, the blueprint of life itself, and modifies it in ways that have unpredictable consequences for the health of humans and eco-systems. Genetic engineering brings genetic material from different species into the genes of food we eat, using the genes of viruses, bacteria, animals and fish. The purpose of genetic engineering is to modify proteins to extend shelf-life and repel insects. No one knows what the effect of mixing genes will have on our ecological balance that has developed over millions of years. We do know that some genetically engineered soybeans have had a significant allergic response in humans. These were removed from the market.

Dr. John Fagan refused a 1.6 million dollar research grant to protest how science is being used in a destructive and irresponsible way. In essence, says Dr. Fagan, the bio-engineering companies are roping all of us into a huge nutritional experiment of global proportions without our knowledge and permission. The problems produced by genetic engineering, the allergens produced, the sterilizing effect on the soil, and the uncontrolled cell mutations, could make the problems related to nuclear waste disposal seem small in comparison.

With regard to genetic engineering, the NLP calls for 3 things:

1. All genetically engineered foods must be labeled as such. The current FDA policy says they do not need to be.
2. More stringent and rigorous testing of genetically engineered foods.
3. A ban on commercialization of such foods until they are shown to be safe; a ban on any use in agriculture or other places that results in the flow of genetically engineered genes into the eco-system. The NLP is at work defending the interests of the people of this country.

Billie Eastman, Yellow Springs, OH

IN CONTEXT Moves to the Web

Context Institute and *IN CONTEXT* have gone through some major changes since December 1995 when it was clear that because of the huge financial losses from publishing *IC* we could not continue in the printed form. It was a signal that after 13 years it was time to change the medium of *IC* and how Context Institute accomplished its mission as a catalyst for significant cultural change towards a humane and sustainable world. We realize that we will lose a number of people who are unable to have access to the Web, however, we would not have been fiscally responsible to continue.

The new web technology is one reason that we are very excited about how we will be able to reach thousands more people with the web site: journalists, students, international folks and others who have not been able to have access to the printed journal. By December, the *IC* subscriber list was around 6,000 and falling. This was also another indication that we needed to change medium to reach far more people if we are to really be effective in our mission.

Other activities that Context Institute will be continuing with will be consulting and speaking. Right now, one project that we are working with is to help Iceland become an eco-country. Robert [Gilman]

expects to be working with folks in Kansas City also. If you know of opportunities for us to speak to or consult with people, please let us know. We are also beginning to explore with a book agent and publishers how we will go about publishing books as our print form. We will be able to send you book review copies of whatever we publish. All of this takes time and we're just getting on our feet again after moving our home and office.

We would like to be able to be in better touch with folks in our new work situation. We want to work more in a "team net" way in cooperation with others, rather than trying to do everything we do in house. We feel that it will be important to keep our overhead much lower, and output higher quality and more often than with a quarterly journal. This will show up in *IC* on the web since we will be able to add new material in a more timely manner. We realize that not everyone will have access to the web, but we do think that between friends, universities, colleges and local libraries, within this year, likely nearly everyone will have access to the web. From there, *IC* can be down loaded and printed out if desired.

Back Issues: We have a wonderful distributor, Molly and Jim Brown at CREATURA BOOKS, P.O. Box 718, Pt. Reyes Station, CA 94956. Tel: 800 306 1778 or 415 663 1778. If you have other suggestions for how we can be more effective in the world, please let me know. We are looking forward to our new beginning.

Diane Gilman, IN CONTEXT, Langley, WA

[Editor's Note: *IN CONTEXT*'s new web site is <http://www.context.org>]

About Mitraniketan

Our activities are in full swing. Whatever help we receive from your side is well utilised as our day-to-day activities require a lot of funds and our present fund position is meagre. We hope we can improve this with careful planning since there is a sufficient

number of people who are committed and well qualified to work as a team.

This year is going to be very significant as far as the future of Mitraniketan is concerned. We hope we can consolidate all our efforts, as a folk high school model 'people's College' is on our present agenda. We are sure we can start it this year. It is one of the major programmes we have undertaken. This should spread as a popular movement in the country through voluntary organisations like Mitraniketan.

Hence we are eager also to be in touch with good voluntary organisations to have a collaborative role established. We also need to come closer with agencies, including government agencies, for a joint action for the promotion of all-round development. A networking of voluntary organisations in this direction is essential and we are making an all-out effort for this. The Panchayat Raj, as a local self-governing body, has a lot of very promising young women. If we can create the consciousness among them to make each unit function democratically, the popular education should be able to arouse citizens.

Here an organisation like Mitraniketan can play a vital role. It is with this in mind that the Folk High School idea is being worked out for mass awakening. We are organising this in collaboration with the Danish Folk High School Association, in Copenhagen. I shall keep you informed of further development. Mitraniketan is one of ten institutions of a voluntary nature, nationally recognised, and has a lot of responsibility to other organisations. We hope we shall have the competency to stand the test of time by the grace of the Almighty. We know we shall continue to enjoy the goodwill and patronage of Community Service and well-meaning citizens of America and Europe.

K. Viswanathan, Mitraniketan, Kerala, India



Announcements

Angela Carmichael and Asherah Wilowe

Though we are happy that Angela has found the "love of her life" and will be married in Yellow Springs on October 5th, we are sorry, for ourselves and her family, that she and Francisco Farrés will be moving to his home in Puerto Rico at the end of October.

I have known Angela for many years and can hardly explain in ordinary human written communication the love I feel for her and how much my association with her, as well as her peace, maturity, steadfastness and consideration, has meant to me. Both I and the members of the Board of Trustees who know her wish her the best in her new adventure.

We at Community Service are fortunate that cheerful Asherah Wilowe applied for the job of secretary when we knew Angela would be leaving. She is currently learning "the ropes" from Angela. This association with Ash looks as if it will prove to be a blessing to us, as well.

Grailville Retreats

A Meditation Retreat will be conducted in the tradition of Vipassana meditation with an emphasis on "Metta," or loving kindness, beginning Sunday, October 13th at 6:30 PM and ending Friday, October 18th at noon. The practice of Metta-Vipassana is revolutionary, with the power to change lives, helping cultivate true happiness in each person and genuine compassion for others. Anna Douglas teaches classes and retreats through Spirit Rock in California and the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. She has 13 years of Vipassana practice and has studied with teachers in the Zen, Advaita and Dzogchen traditions.

A one-day retreat on 'The Journey Home' will be held Sunday, October 27th, from 10 AM to 5 PM. This day is for women moving through their lives with the intention to learn and grow and those who

feel a longing for a richer connection to their deeper self. Theresa Horansapunar, recently relocated from northern California, has spent the last 15 years as a psychotherapist, teacher and workshop leader, integrating body, mind and spirit.

For more information or to register for a Grailville retreat, contact Nell Carlson at Grailville, 932 O'Bannonville Rd., Loveland, OH 45140 (Phone (513) 683-2340).



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Membership

Membership is a means of supporting and sharing the work of Community Service. The Basic \$25 annual membership contribution includes a subscription to our quarterly Newsletter and 10% off Community Service-published literature. Larger contributions are always needed, however, and smaller ones will be gladly accepted. Community Service is a nonprofit corporation which depends on contributions and the sale of literature to fund its work so that it can offer its services to those who need them. All contributions are appreciated, needed and tax-deductible. **Due to added postage costs, foreign membership, including Canada, is \$30 in U.S. currency.**

Have Your Friends Seen The Newsletter?

Please send the names and addresses of your friends who might enjoy receiving a sample Newsletter and booklist. If you wish specific issues sent, please send \$1 per copy.

Editor's Notes

We welcome letters to the editor (under 300 words) and articles (700-2000 words) about any notable communities or people who are improving the quality of life in their communities. Please enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you wish the article returned. The only compensation we can offer is a year's subscription to our newsletter, the satisfaction of seeing your words in print and knowing you have helped spread encouraging and/or educational information.

We occasionally exchange our mailing list with a group with similar purposes, such as the Arthur Morgan School at Celo or Communities Magazine. If you do not wish us to give your name to anyone, please let us know.

Address Change

If there is an error on your mailing label, or you are moving, please send the old label and any corrections to us. It increases our cost greatly if the Post Office notifies us of moves, and you will not receive your newsletter promptly.

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You can tell when your Community Service membership expires by looking at the month and year in the upper left corner of your mailing label. Please renew your membership if it has expired or will expire before 12/96. The annual membership contribution is \$25. We do not send individual reminders to renew.

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